EVIDENCE FROM THE BHA TO THE SMC ENQUIRY ON BROADCASTING

Memorandum from the Executive Committee of the British Humanist Association

1. As Humanists, we welcome the Social Morality Council's enquiry into broadcasting, since we are concerned with the development of an open, civilised, non-sectarian society, and see broadcasting as one of the main means of formulating questions and answers about social values.

2. The present broadcasting authorities - the BBC and IBA - do much very well. There can be little criticism of their provision of entertainment, other than that too great a proportion of peak-hour television is devoted to it. Their explicitly educational programmes are of a consistently high standard; there is clear scope for expansion of this element of their output and for a development of Open University broadcasts. Most of their programmes which seek to inform are excellent; within this category we place documentaries and discussion programmes on all topics as well as current affairs programmes and news. Technical and professional standards are high; and, compared with many foreign countries, the proportion of serious programmes and the degree of independence from Government and other interests are admirable.

3. (In most of these respects, however, ITV seems regrettably content with a lower standard than the BBC. We find it an inevitable conclusion that this results from the structure of ITV, whereby the dominant aim of the programme companies is profit, which requires them to attract the maximum of advertising, which in turn requires programming aimed at high 'ratings'. Innovation and risk taking, particularly at peak hours, are in practice discouraged, and the IBA is too weak a watchdog to have any noticeable effect. Any solution to this problem, it seems to us, must involve IBA control of programming, and we therefore welcome the Authority's recent decision to be represented at meetings of the network programming committee, although we emphasise that this is as yet little more than a gesture.)

4. We do wish, however, to make a general complaint about current affairs and news broadcasts, principally those on television. We find that most such programmes are presented for maximum impact, as an entertainment* or show, rather than for maximum understanding. One result is that there is a lack of background information and analysis in favour of superficial, visual treatment, and another result is that coverage of long-foreseen events is delayed until they are "news" - i.e., are happening or have happened (e.g. reorganisation of local government and the NHS), with the implication - and result - that the audience is passive or (realising the impossibility of affecting events) alienated from politics. The alternative is to treat the audience as citizens, potentially active and involved in the argument being presented, and to facilitate such involvement by putting programmes on at an early date *before* Civil Service and governmental committees have been made. Television should have its equivalent of the Rothschild think-tank (CPRS) so that the public at large can have some say in major social policies.

5. This leads us to a fundamental criticism of the view that the broadcasting authorities seem to have of the role of radio and television in society. The days of concensus and of the myth of universally shared interests are dead. We are aware today as never before in recent history of the plurality of our community and the conflicts within it. Differences of religion, race, class, culture and political creed are too often becoming divisions and destructive rather than creative conflicts. The surface ripples of industrial struggles and sectarian strife are the commonplace of today's news; racial hostility (under cover of superficial arguments about immigration) has reached near respectability over the last decade and our cities, neglected by all but the property developers, are tending towards physical conflict as racial minorities become more conscious of the subservient roles in which they are cast by society. Simultaneously, in strong contrast to direct confrontation by squatting and sit-ins, there is a disquieting level of alienation from political institutions and of pathological anomy among the socially deprived who have learnt the bitter lesson that they cannot control even their own lives.

6. Society, moreover, is changing rapidly, with appalling risks lying ahead (see, for example, "The Limits of Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind", by Dennis Meadows, published by Earth Island and distributed by Angus & Robertson.) In this dynamic situation, there is no option of standing still. Broadcasting must adapt to this environment. The paternalism of 'educating, informing and entertaining' - its Charter's original and continuing formulation of the BBC's role - must develop into something more collaboratibe and socially involved. Broadcasting must encourage participation - in society at large and therefore in broadcasting itself. Instead of breeding

Typically, one recent radio documentary on a serious subject ended with the words 'we hope you have enjoyed *the programme' - not 'found it interesting/enlightened/stimulating/useful'. Is enjoyment in any way a relevant criterion for programmes on world hunger, racial conflict or homelessness?*

an alienated passivity, it must act as a catalyst, stimulating social concern and political action. It must express differences, not suppress them, and it must encourage the creative expression of conflict. Many viewpoints are quite ignored by both BBC and ITV (the particular example of the utter lack of programmes explicitly about Humanism is detailed in the Annexe to this memorandum). In an age when broadcasting is the pre-eminent medium of communication, this is felt almost as an act of violence by those cut off from their potential audiences.

7. That the broadcasting authorities are not unaware of this new role is apparent in the proliferation of "phone-in" programmes and audience participation programmes and the introduction of the innovatory 'Open Door" series on BBC-2, where the Corporation has surrendered editorial control rarely before. But phone-in programmes are usually still elitist - the experts (often not experts at all but merely personalities) are in the studio to answer the questions; the telephone participant's distorted voice is cut off after a few minutes before he can develop a point - and, as has been pointed out in the correspondence columns of the *Listener*, they have a built-in bias to the middle class and are open to the activities of organised but discreet lobbies. Further, the Open Door programmes are most unlikely (as the BBC has discovered) ever to meet the demand from interested groups for time to put across their views. (The series is, however, highly welcome, if only for disturbing the monotony of unbroken conventional wisdom from the Establishment and the official representatives of the centre left and the centre right.

8. If phone-in and the Open Door programmes do not meet the need, what do we recommend?

(a) *That the broadcasting authorities should explicitly accept a participatory political philosophy in their overall programme planning and in their current affairs and other relevant programmes, with the aim of helping the development of an informed citizenship.* This will affect, as noted above, the timing as well as the content and presentation of programmes.

(b) That the broadcasting authorities should accept the reality of conflict in our plural society and help its constructive expression. Conflict should not be dramatised as a device to obtain 'good television', nor should it be artificially papered over or hidden. The problems facing society are complex, deep-rooted and difficult. They deserve commensurate treatment by radio and television.

(c) As part of (b), that the BBC and IBA should recognise that conventional Christianity is no longer the only plausible basis for creative concern and moral assessment of the dilemmas facing society. They should accordingly end the monopoly of Christianity in programmes examining matters of social and individual morality. The more open approach of recent BBC programmes in the Sunday evening religious 'slot' (especially the Sunday Debate) is welcome; but the BBC should recognise that, unless they amend the function of the Religious Broadcasting Department, Christianity - and indeed a particular 'brand' of Christianity - will continue to be seen as the touchstone of moral judgement, with the same undesirable sectarian and paternalistic implications as heretofore. (The BHA has for some years advocated the broadening of the Religious Broadcasting Department into a Religious and Social Morality Department, with a parallel amendment to the role and composition of the Central Religious Advisory Council).

(d) That the broadcasting authorities should perceive and use radio and television in the service of democracy, a means of allowing people to direct and control the inevitable social changes that lie ahead. They should take broadcasting to the people as a means for them to speak to each other and to reach (at length) constructive agreements. This cannot easily be done within the confines of a half-hour programme - it must be the culmination of a process of community action and involvement by the programme makers. They must realise that they cannot any longer get away with descending like itinerant entomologists to capture and make off with sample workers and bosses, councillors and ratepayers, developers and squatters 'in the can' to exhibit (after judicious editing) as prize 'specimens' to their admiring audience of millions. Instead they must adopt the more patient approach of community development workers, and for any programme on a particular problem - for example, homelessness or race relations - must explore the ground, familiarise themselves with the people involved and their viewpoints and encourage articulation of those viewpoints. They must examine whether their own formulation of the problem is correct, revise it and build up slowly to a programme. They must, moreover, allow for feedback from the programme, present the feedback to the audience and encourage and point to the means of active participation in the continuing debate or in helping to solve the problem. Such major projects are probably best undertaken in co-operation with other agencies (e.g. social workers, voluntary organisations) who can contribute expertise and take over when the programme team moves on. Such programmes have been successfully put on by

8(d) Continued.
several television stations in the United States - the results are discussed, for example, in Brian Groombridge's "Television and the People". *

(e) That the statutory aims of broadcasting be revised to take in the democratic role outlined above. Brian Groombridge recommends the following formulation:

"It shall be the duty of the BBC and of the IBA to provide public services of education, information and entertainment, and to contribute, through their programmes and in other ways deemed appropriate, to the extension and invigoration of the nation's democratic life, and to understanding between the different segments of society." (Op.cit., p.145)

We believe that such a formulation would have a real effect on the attitudes of the broadcasting authorities and the programme makers.

(f) That, since change is particularly unwelcome to successful commercial enterprises, who see their own interests and profits threatened by it, and since therefore commercial television as at present structured is unlikely to prove capable of tackling satisfactorily the important social role we see for television, the IBA should, as a minimum reform, take control of programmes for independent television.

(g) That the fourth television channel be allocated neither to the BBC nor to the IBA, but to a new, independent foundation or trust. This body would have the duty more of "publishing" programmes created by others than os creating programmes itself, and should seek its material from as wide a variety of sources as possible: community groups, voluntary organisations, commercial programme-making companies, political parties, trades unions, independent groups of artists or entertainers, ad hoc groups of people coming together to make a programme about something on which they have strong feelings - the list is almost endless. The finance should come from a similar variety of sources (variety would make for strength and independence) - viewers' and listeners' subscriptions, government grants, sponsorship, donations from trusts or companies and so on: all sources other than licence money and spot advertising, in fact. A channel so organised would have an important part to play in our plural, open society and would offer a true alternative to the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of the IBA and the BBC.

9. Are our suggestions elitist and paternalistic? We see the SMC enquiry as a key contribution to an informed public debate about the future of broadcasting. In this sense, then, any suggestions that we make are not elitist prescriptions but rather contributions to the debate. There is, however, another sense in which the suggestions we offer may be construed as elitist. It is commonly alleged by broadcasting staff and others that the public constantly exercises a democratic choice about the kind of programmes received through their selection of the programmes they watch. We believe this view to be false and unacceptable for two reasons.

10. First, if only a few producers are given the opportunity of discovering ways of making important issues the subjects of effective programmes the public has little chance of a real choice. A full-blooded and imaginative programme about local government or the control of the health service might well turn out to be a talking point for weeks.

11. Second, if one accepts that radio and television are extremely important organs of public communication, to accept the notion that democracy is served by the turn of a switch is in effect to accept the case for instant referenda on social questions. The informed referendum is, in itself, a controversial enough subject for us to feel safe in ruling out of serious consideration the acceptance of instant and ill-informed referenda as the basis of public choice in the key decisions in public communication.

12. Finally, we hope that the Enquiry will consider the profound social effects of the increasing availability and "pushing" of television. The changes we recommend, (at least in the initial stages) might result sometimes in smaller audiences; but they would not thereby represent a change for the worse. Far from it: the country has at present an unexamined policy about television which has simply grown. It is "the more TV watched, the better" - we do not accept this.

**We recommend very strongly to the Enquiry this book by Brian Groombridge ("Television and The People: A Programme for Democratic Participation", Penguin Education Special, 1972, 45p), which contains a far more detailed treatment of some of the points we make in this memorandum.*

Since 1945 there have been two public enquiries into broadcasting. The first was in 1949, by the Beveridge Committee, and the second was in 1960 by the Pilkington Committee. Both made specific recommendations about Humanist broadcasting time - see below.

BEVERIDGE COMMITTEE

Paragraph 256:

"The Ethical Union, established by distinguished founders in 1896, give as their purpose not the combating of any religious faith but the upholding of the independence of ethics as the fundamental and universal principle of personal and social life. They stated to us that in most Christian countries fellow humanists and rationalists disposed of regular time in which to present their arguments and develop their views; they asked that the established humanist and rationalist organisations, or a liaison committee representing such organisations, should have regular time allotted to them for conducting their teaching. It is difficult to deny that bodies like the Ethical Union are pursuing seriously the same purpose as that put before us as vital by the British Council of Churches - the bringing about of spiritual and moral regeneration. They can hardly claim a place in religious broadcasting, since for them morality is independent of revealed religion. They should, according to the measure of their seriousness, have opportunity of putting their views before listeners but it is logical to make this part of the Talks Department rather than of the Religious Broadcasting Department.*

Recommendation 63:

Bodies which without being religious devote themselves to study of spiritual and moral issues should, according to the measure of their seriousness, have opportunities of broadcasting, but under the Talks Department rather than the Religious Broadcasting Department."

*The Ethical Union is now known as the British Humanist Association.

PILKINGTON COMMITTEE

Paragraph 292:

"Claims have been made by non-religious bodies, such as the Humanist Group, for a small but regular allocation of broadcasting time: and also for time in schools broadcasting. The argument is that, if some religious bodies have special time set aside for broadcasting, then organisations of people who believe that morality is independent of revealed religion should be treated similarly. The opposing argument is that, since this is a Christian country, and since its moral standards are founded in the Christian tradition accepted by nearly everyone, if often tacitly, the denominations representing that tradition have a special claim. This we accept. It is, however, the more important that the non-religious bodies are allowed their fair share of time in controversial broadcasting outside the periods set aside for religious broadcasting.

Recommendation 69:

Non-religious bodies such as the Humanist Group should be allowed their fair share of time in controversial broadcasting outside periods set aside for religious broadcasting."

In spite of repeated representations to the BBC, the IBA and the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, the recommendations of neither of these official committees has ever been implemented. The argument is sometimes heard from the broadcasting authorities that humanist views are already well represented in plays, discussions, etc. This may well be true, but after all a very small proportion of the population of this country are practising Christians. The same argument could equally well be used of the representations of Christian views. That this argument was rejected by both official committees can be seen from their recommendations.

The BHA has suggested to both the BBC and to the IBA that the present Central Religious Advisory Council should be replaced by an entirely new representative Advisory Council, made up of all shades of belief and non-belief. This new body might well be called the Central Social Morality Advisory Council. We recommend this suggestion to the present Enquiry.